

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 51 | Number 6 (Fall 1992)

pps. 663-665

Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990." *The Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 663-665.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9710>

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them, its story was to have an almost fairy-tale denouement. Coming to the rescue was an unlikely *deus ex machina* in the person of Harold Walter Siebens, a Storm Lake native who never finished high school but who struck it rich in the oil fields of Canada and gave to Buena Vista in the spring of 1980 a gift of eighteen million dollars, perhaps the largest single benefaction ever made to an Iowa college.

Cumberland, however, does not end his story with the traditional "they-lived-happily-ever-after" line. He is at his very best when he warns that the college's prosperity and its expansion into nine branches covering the state from Spencer to Clarinda and from Mason City to Ottumwa will create new and no less imperative demands on its leadership. The wise counsel offered in the final pages of his history will provide fascinating reading for all survivors who have guided his college through famine, but it must be required reading for those who will continue to lead it through feast in the decades ahead.

Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990, by Gerald D. Nash. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991. vii, 318 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY PAULA M. NELSON, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PLATTEVILLE

There is good news and bad news on the western history front. The good news is that more and more historians are at work in the field, adding strength and numbers to a field declared dying or dead just a few years ago. The bad news is that a significant faction of today's western historians are persistently negative about their subject and virtually solipsistic in their presentism. In *Creating the West*, Gerald D. Nash surveys the changing outlook of western historians over the past century, from the official closure of the frontier in 1890 to the present. His analytical approach is the notion of the historian's "ecology"—the historian's craft shaped by personal environment and worldview. Nash recognizes four separate, definable generations of western historians, whose interpretations reflected the experiences and cultural milieus of each generation. Nash also distinguishes four major perceptions of the West that have figured to some extent in all interpretations of the West: the West as frontier, as region, as urban civilization, and as mythical utopia. Each generation of historians has adapted these perceptions to their own generational experiences. The nature of the myth of the West for the earliest generation of frontier historians differs quite dramatically from the myth of the West for the most recent generation.

What does Nash discover about the generations of western historians? The first generation, the one Frederick Jackson Turner exemplified and dominated, shared the experience of the end of the frontier and the rise of the United States as an economic power and an expansionist participant in world affairs. That generation was both nostalgic for the frontier of their youth and proud of the accomplishments of westerners who had created a society out of the wilderness. They were a homogeneous group who shared a positive view of the western past and could visualize a strong, unified future. The next generation, which Nash sees as developing in the 1920s, was larger, more diverse, more urban, and somewhat more cynical. Those historians occupied an unstable, uncertain world, yet for most the myth of the West remained positive, providing an "antidote for the more dreary present" (199). The third generation came of age in 1945 as World War II ended. The postwar boom spurred tremendous growth in the historical profession and in the field of western history. With such growth came increasing social and cultural diversity among western historians and an increasing element of cynicism. According to Nash, in the 1945-1960 period, historians of the West became less willing to accept simple, monocausal explanations for events, such as Turner's thesis that directly linked westward expansion to the development of democratic institutions in all parts of the United States. Yet the West as myth, though perceived differently due to the influence of psychoanalytical theory in the United States, remained positive. The final generation in Nash's analysis began in the 1960s, a time of severe social tension and dislocation. For many of the most recent historians of the West, pessimism and negativism about the West dominated. While they provided important analysis of new issues, such as race and gender and the environment, their doctrinaire and polemical stances, their hostility toward alternative approaches, and their prosecutorial rather than evocative approach to their subjects have led to fragmentation of the field and relativism "with a vengeance" (276). Their interpretation of the West as myth followed the same pattern. Rejecting the positive myth of the West, the post-sixties generation "viewed it as a profoundly disturbing and negative" element in the American story, one of which "Americans should be ashamed" (200).

Creating the West is a detailed and informative overview of important issues in the historiography of the American West that raises broader issues about the writing of history generally. Should historians try to remain "objective" or should they become social critics, applying their personal political and moral agendas to the past? Nash chooses a middle ground. His analysis of "generations" in historical scholarship indicates his acceptance of social and cultural influences

on the historian's vision. But he rejects the wholesale abandonment of fairness, justice, and detachment in the recent prosecution of the past. Such "one-sided indictments," he warns, can "destroy the very fabric of national identity" (276).

Nash does hold out some hope for the future of the field. The 1990s, he believes, will bring yet another generation of young historians into the fold; he hopes that these scholars will strike a balance between the extremes of past and present interpretations of the West. In the meantime, it behooves all historians of the West who share Nash's commitment to the middle ground to write and speak clearly and forcefully on behalf of the complexities of the past. The story of the West is much more than "us" versus "them" or who oppressed whom or who despoiled what. The story of the West is triumph as well as tragedy; success, accomplishment, and contentment as much as failure, defeat, and alienation. As the study of the western past moves into its second century, moderate voices must restore balance and intellectual honesty to the field. We do not have to wait for younger scholars to begin the work; the time and the opportunity for rebirth and reinterpretation is now.

Quantitative Methods for Historians: A Guide to Research, Data, and Statistics, by Konrad H. Jarausch and Kenneth A. Hardy. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. xv, 247 pp. Tables, figures, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$37.50 cloth, \$11.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT P. SWIERENGA, KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

Historians have needed a new elementary handbook of quantitative methods since the early 1980s when Charles Dollar and Richard Jensen's *Historian's Guide to Statistics* (1971) became outdated by warp-speed advances in computers and their software. Realizing this need, Konrad Jarausch, a European social historian at the University of North Carolina, and two colleagues in Germany—a statistician and a software expert—published in 1985 a German-language textbook that Jarausch, then a visiting professor in Germany, tested on his students. Favorable reactions prompted him to translate the work and recast it to meet the needs of Anglo-American students. His colleague, Kenneth Hardy, director of UNC's statistical laboratory, revised and expanded the statistical chapters of the English-language version, which constitute the middle section of the book. Jarausch wrote the first and third sections, which describe the nature of formalized research guided by theory and aided by statistics and computers and the place of quantitative methods in history. These chapters sparkle

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